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ABSTRACT

This report synthesizes information from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education on factors associated with special education teacher quality and teachers' intent to remain in the profession. It applies these findings to the school administrator's role in promoting teacher quality. Concerning teacher quality and career plans, it finds that professional development is linked to workforce quality; school climate is tied to workload manageability and career plans; and teacher turnover relates to workforce quality. Examination of special education teachers' needs and strengths notes that teaching diverse students remains a challenge, that making collaboration a priority is worth the effort, and that using technology in instruction remains an area of need. Recommendations for administrators include: (1) determine the teacher turnover rate in your agency and develop strategies for addressing causes; (2) consider adopting school- or district-wide approaches to critical instructional practices; (3) objectively evaluate the scope and quality of your professional development program; and (4) consider continuing professional development in the areas of cultural/linguistic diversity, technology, and collaboration. Suggested Web sites are listed. (DB)

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SPeNSE Summary Sheet

Local Administrators' Role in Promoting Teacher Quality

Westat, Inc.

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SPeNSE Summary Sheet

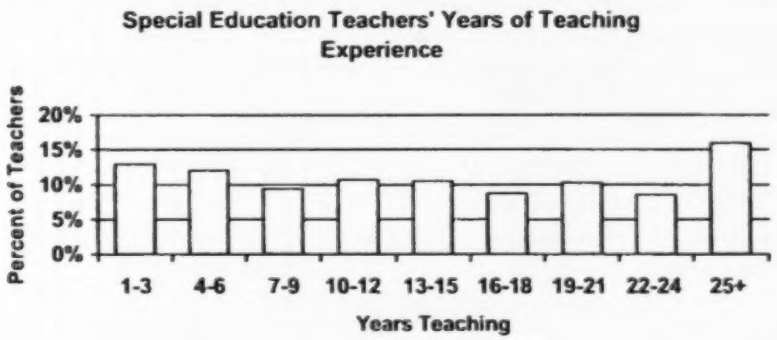
Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education
www.spense.org

Local Administrators' Role in Promoting Teacher Quality

Ensuring that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary for their changing roles and that working conditions support teachers in those roles are challenging tasks borne primarily by district and school administrators. While local administrators sometimes struggle to fill teaching assignments in special education, they are also in a position to shape the quality of the workforce in ways that no one else can. This report synthesizes information from the Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) on factors associated with special education teacher quality and teachers' intent to remain in the profession.

What Factors Are Associated With Special Education Teacher Quality and Career Plans?

While local administrators have limited control over the content of preservice programs, they have at their disposal many tools for enhancing the skills and overall quality of the teachers they employ. In SPeNSE, teacher quality was measured by combining teaching experience; certification; level of educational attainment; classroom practices in teaching reading, promoting inclusion, and managing behavior; self-efficacy; and professional activities such as reading professional journals. Factors associated with teacher quality and intent to stay in special education include professional development, school climate, and turnover rates.



Professional development is linked to workforce quality. Both the scope and quality of professional development experiences appear to be associated with special education teacher quality. Teachers whose recent inservice experiences covered a broad range of specified topics[1] had higher scores on the SPeNSE teacher quality index than those whose recent professional development covered fewer topics. Likewise, teachers who perceived their recent district-supported professional development as relevant and of high quality had higher teacher quality scores.

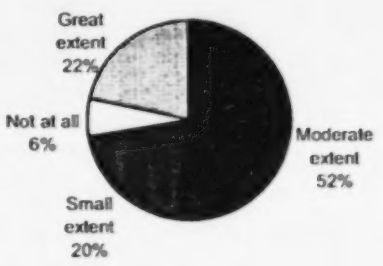
Overall, special education teachers devoted considerable time to continuing professional development, averaging 59 hours in 1999-2000. Special education teachers rated the quality of district-supported professional development moderately high. However, they also reported that it did not reliably provide an active role for teachers as in-service instructors or allow time for planning implementation of newly acquired skills. For beginning special education teachers, meetings with other new teachers and informal help from colleagues were more beneficial than district-supported in-service programs. Interestingly, general education teachers found formal mentoring programs more helpful

[1] These were knowledge and skills extracted from the Council for Exceptional Children's Standards for Entry into Practice.

than did special educators, perhaps because special education teachers were less likely to have a mentor in their building whose assignment was similar to their own.

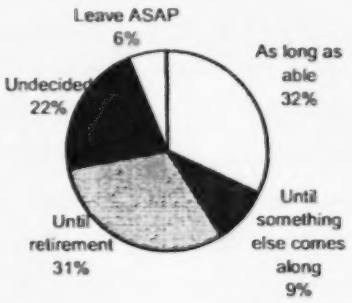
School climate is tied to workload manageability and career plans. School climate is the extent to which teachers perceive their schools as caring and supportive of students and staff. Special education teachers are sensitive to differences in school climate, even more so than general education teachers. After controlling for other differences, school climate was associated with the manageability of teachers' workload and their intent to stay in teaching. It is possible that a positive school climate counteracts some of the stress associated with teaching students with disabilities and, consequently, promotes retention and teacher quality. Schools with better climate may also be better organized, devote more attention to instruction, and have administrators who insulate teachers from factors that detract from good teaching, such as excessive paperwork.

To What Extent Are Special Education Teachers' Workloads Managable?



Teacher turnover relates to workforce quality. Teaching experience is an important component of teacher quality, and research suggests that high teacher turnover is detrimental to student learning. Therefore, limiting teacher attrition, in general, and among teachers with several years of experience, in particular, is central to enhancing teacher quality. After controlling for many other differences, districts with higher turnover rates had lower teacher quality scores than those with lower turnover rates. Observed differences in special education teacher quality may indicate a self-selection process, in which high-quality teachers leave weak schools and are replaced by less qualified teachers. It may also suggest that a high rate of teacher turnover is detrimental to the teaching and learning process itself.

How Long Do Special Education Teachers Plan to Stay?



Previous research in general education suggests several organizational variables associated with teacher turnover rates: salaries; levels of administrative support; student discipline problems; school size; and public/private status, with private schools experiencing higher rates of turnover than public schools (Ingersoll, 1991)[2].

What Are Special Education Teachers' Strengths and Areas of Need?

Specific information about special education teachers' perceived strengths and weaknesses can help administrators plan appropriate professional development activities and identify skills needed in recruits. Nationwide, special education teachers consider themselves skillful in planning effective lessons, using appropriate instructional techniques, managing behavior, working with parents, and monitoring students' progress and adjusting instruction accordingly. However, continued attention needs to be devoted to three areas in which special education teachers report relative weakness: teaching cultur-

[2] Complete citations are listed on www.spense.org.

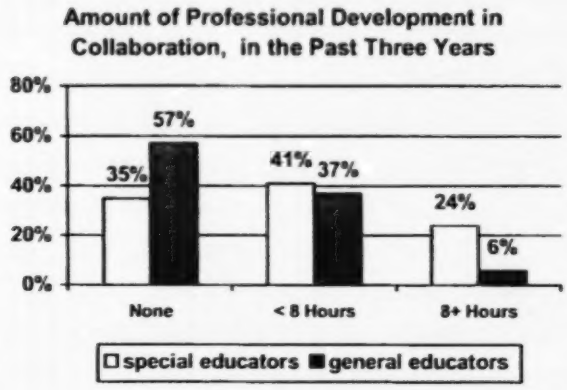
ally and linguistically diverse learners, collaborating with colleagues, and using technology in instruction.

Teaching diverse students remains a challenge. On average, almost one-fourth of special education teachers' students are from a cultural or linguistic group different from their own, and 7 percent are English language learners (ELL). The nation's changing school demographics are creating a demand for new teaching skills. Unfortunately, many special educators indicate they have not mastered the skills needed to accommodate culturally and linguistically diverse students. This skill deficiency is not surprising because 51 percent of recently prepared special educators said their preservice programs did not address the needs of this student population. Furthermore, the majority of today's special education teachers completed their initial preparation when the nation's students were considerably more homogeneous.

After controlling for other differences, teachers who used specific classroom practices designed to teach ELL tended to work in schools that had adopted a common approach to meeting ELL needs, had more continuing professional development in accommodating culturally and linguistically diverse students' instructional needs, and were more proficient in the non-English languages spoken by their students. In addition, special educators who considered themselves skillful in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students had different instructional practices from their peers who considered themselves less skillful. These teachers more often taught vocabulary prior to a lesson, developed lessons specifically designed for English language development, or used extended discourse within a lesson.

Making collaboration a priority is worth the effort. Three-quarters of all students with disabilities spend a substantial portion of their day in general education classes. Therefore, confidence in collaborating with general educators, paraprofessionals, and other service providers is an important aspect of a special education teachers' job. Forty-seven percent of special educators who had been teaching 5 years or fewer, however, did not receive any preservice preparation in collaborating with general education teachers. Moreover, 35 percent of all special education teachers had no professional development in collaborating with non-special education teachers in the past 3 years.

SPeNSE data show that continuing professional development in this area contributed to special educators' teaching practices and perceptions of skill. Special education teachers who spent 8 or more professional development hours in the past 3 years on collaborating with non-special education teachers reported using these practices more frequently:



- identifying opportunities for students to work on IEP goals within the context of non-special education activities;
- providing information to general education teachers to help them respond to students in a constructive, supportive manner; and
- helping general educators understand how students would benefit from being in the non-special education classroom.

Furthermore, those who indicated that district-supported professional development promoted collaboration among teachers to a great extent reported using practices that promote inclusion more frequently than those who indicated that collaboration was not a focus in the district. Special education teachers also reported using inclusion strategies more frequently if those strategies reflected a common approach used throughout their school or district.

Using technology in instruction remains an area of need. Special education teachers, on the whole, are relatively unskilled in using technology in instruction, based on self-report. However, those with preservice preparation and continuing professional development in using technology were significantly more skillful. For example, of those special education teachers with no preservice in using technology in instruction, 13 percent felt skillful to a great extent compared to 32 percent of those with some preservice. Likewise, of those who had no professional development in the past 3 years in using technology in instruction, 10 percent felt skillful to a great extent compared to 39 percent of those with more than 8 hours.

Working Toward the Future

There are specific steps administrators can take to improve the skills and job performance of their special education teachers. Web sites are provided as sources of information and/or assistance.

1. Determine the teacher turnover rate in your agency. If it is over 15 percent per year, consider possible reasons for turnover, such as school climate and working conditions. Develop strategies for addressing specific causes of teacher turnover. Adequate levels of administrative and peer support, teacher influence in school decisions, control over curriculum and instruction, and salary adjustments may help improve turnover rates. (www.special-ed-careers.org/pdf/retguide.pdf;www.sbec.state.tx.us/txbess/turnoverrpt.pdf)
2. Consider adopting school- or district-wide approaches to critical instructional practices. Teachers working in isolation reported using best practices less frequently in promoting inclusion and teaching English language learners than those working as part of a coordinated program. (www.asri.edu/CFSP/brochure/abtcons.htm; http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu; http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/clastest/materials.html)
3. Objectively evaluate the scope and quality of your professional development program. Determine whether you are addressing knowledge and skills needed by your special education teachers and whether the content is delivered in a way that is useful and relevant. Be sure to devote time for teachers to plan ways to implement new skills. (www.ncrel.org/pd/; www.nsdc.org/educatorindex.htm)
4. Consider continuing professional development in the areas of cultural/linguistic diversity, technology, and collaboration. National data indicate that special education teachers feel inadequately prepared in these areas. That may also be true for teachers in your school or district. (www.ncbe.gwu.edu; www.edc.org/FSC/NCIP; www.cast.org/udl; www.ncrel.org/tech/tpd/; www.asri.edu/CFSP/brochure/abtcons.htm)

For additional information or technical assistance on special education programs and services, go to www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/Resources.

The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), funded by OSEP and conducted by Westat, included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of local administrators, special and general education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and paraprofessionals in spring and fall 2000. Forty-six percent of sampled districts and 69 percent of sampled service providers participated. Weight adjustments were used to address nonresponse bias, but care should be taken in interpreting results. For more information and a complete list of references, go to www.spense.org.

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